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TENNYSON

BY

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TENNYSON.

BY KATE M. WARREN.

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON, poet, was a man of varied and deep interests; science, literature ancient and modern, social and ethical matters, amongst others, engaged him, but he united all these interests in the service of poetry. He believed in his own vocation, laboured to fulfil it, was true to it all his life; and his conception of the poet's vocation was, as he himself said, that of "art for art's sake and man's sake." The range of his work is exceedingly wide in both subject-matter and form, but he never wrote a verse that was not carefully wrought, nor a single line with low intention. He was a great poet, a supreme artist, and a "good man" such as Walter Scott would have loved. Though he frequented the world of men less than Browning, his virility of spirit, differently expressed, is as remarkable as that of his great compeer. Many of the finest minds of his age have testified to the greatness of his character and personality.*

Together with Browning, who was, however, never so widely read as Tennyson, he held the field of poetry in Eng-

* See his son's "Memoir" and "Tennyson and his Friends."

land for nearly two-thirds of the nineteenth century, and his influence has left on English thought, feeling, imagination, art, and even speech, deep and indelible traces. Opinion has varied, and still varies, as to what is most valuable in his work, and as to his rank in the world of poets. Even in Tennyson's lifetime, though his popularity was extreme when once he had gained recognition, different opinions about him were current, and after his death what has been called the "reaction" against him increased. At the present day there are signs that this is passing, but it cannot be yet affirmed that Tennyson has taken his final rank (as Chaucer, Spenser, and Milton have taken theirs) among the poets of England.. That his place, when assigned by Time and the educated judgment of men, will be a high one, few students of poetry have any doubt.

There are various ways of entering upon the work of a great poet.* It may be useful and delightful, in some cases, or for a special purpose, to acquaint oneself, from the first, with details of the poet's temperament and character, the state and course of his life with its human limitations, and the thoughts of other people about it all; but the chief thing that matters is the poet's work which he wrought out by the noblest action of his genius, and which he desired should stand to posterity as the best he had to give. It is better, as a rule, to look at the poems before reading much about the poet, but in the case of Tennyson we are in a peculiar position as regards biography; it may

* The following account of Tennyson's work is not to be read as a complete criticism of it. It is a survey only of the chief poems, with some emphasis upon their beauty and greater attractions, and is written mainly for those who are either beginning to study the poet or are not yet closely acquainted with him.

be said that he has assisted in the writing of his own Life and would wish us to use what has been written as a companion to his poetry. The "Memoir" by Hallam, who was for many years his father's constant companion, contains, in addition to the numerous letters of absorbing interest, a number of biographical details given by the poet himself, his points of view on events and questions of his day, together with notes and varied criticism on his poems. It is the voice of Tennyson that we hear more often than that of his son. For this reason the "Memoir" has been put down in the Book List as the one essential addition to the poems themselves. The order of the poems in the one volume edition of the "Complete Works" is mainly the chronological order of their writing, and the reader will probably find it best to follow that order, except in the case of the dramas, which may be left till the end, or even omitted altogether by anyone not already well acquainted with Tennyson.

I.

Tennyson's work embodies his life. He wove into his poetry his thoughts and feelings about almost everything that touched him, in public events and emotions, or in his private world. His outward life, on the whole, was fortunate; his private and home relationships were generally happy, while to few poets in their lifetime has it fallen, as to him, to receive the approval of the multitude at the same time as the appreciation of the audience "fit" and "few." Such hardships and sorrows as he had to endure in the earlier part of his life, severe though they may have been, were not so overwhelming as to obstruct gravely the working of his genius; and out of the severest of them all the poet wrought great music. After his marriage in 1850 he had the continual com-

panionship of a woman of unusually fine nature who was worthy of her vocation as the poet's wife—"Heaven entered into my life when I wedded her," he said. Yet, in spite of all these happy advantages—as well as other more material ones—Tennyson's intense sensitiveness, his power of vision, his habit of looking things straight in the face, together with a slight inherited tendency to melancholy, prevented him, even when most fortunate, from ever finding life too easy. And all these feelings and experiences became, in a simple and natural way, grist for the mill of the poet's mind.

Born in 1809, he lived till 1892, and the whole time, from early boyhood, when he used to spread out his arms to the wind, crying, "I hear a voice that's speaking in the wind," down to the last poem, "Crossing the Bar," the desire to embody in melodious form the experiences of his own soul and the nation's soul (as far as he could understand it) never left him. All his life Tennyson was an adventurer in the world of art and of the invisible and inner life where are the springs of art. He seldom visited countries outside his own, he was greatly content with his home in the Isle of Wight or Surrey, but his travels in the lands of the spirit were as many as the wanderings of his own classic Ulysses over the face of the earth. And it is perhaps not too fanciful to discern some connexion between his poem of "Ulysses," written in full manhood, and that last utterance of the aged poet as the long day of his life drew to a close :

Sunset and evening star
And one clear call for me.

But the restless note of the roving classic hero has passed into calm expectation of the supreme adventure which lies in the vision of the Pilot.

II.

POEMS OF 1842 AND EARLIER.

Tennyson's first poems were published, in company with some of his brothers' work, in 1826 ("Poems of Two Brothers"). In 1830 and 1832, in two slim volumes, he appeared as an independent poet. In 1842 many of these earlier poems, revised, were gathered up into one book, with an additional volume of new poetry. It was by these two famous volumes that he first gained wider recognition as a poet. The first section of the poems in the "Complete Works," beginning with "Claribel" and ending with the "Poet's Song," includes all those which appeared in the volumes of 1842. Taken altogether they represent nearly all the types of poetical work he afterwards followed in longer or shorter form—classical and English idylls; studies of moral problems; studies of character; of love and passion; of lighter matters of romance and fancy; ballads; poems of autobiographical interest, and those which express some of his political convictions. Many of them reveal his poetic power at its noblest: he never surpassed in strength and beauty of imagination, in lovely melody, and in fine workmanship, such poems as "The Lady of Shalott," "The Palace of Art," "Ulysses," "The Lotus Eaters," the "Morte d'Arthur," and others. The present writer has been told by one who remembered the advent of these poems that they came upon the world as an almost intoxicating revelation of beauty.

The variety and strength of his poetic interests and powers appear all through the volumes in a multitude of ways: in his scientifically exact yet ever poetic nature-

description; in his clear analysis of certain types of mind; in the statement of his firm belief in the need and beauty of the simple, homely, common virtues in every class of society; in the expression of his faith in the onward movement of mankind to nobler life; in his humour, grim or dainty, as he viewed the world and the individual; in the lighter play of his fancy; and through all and in all—even in the most trivial poem—in his superb metrical art. Those who wish may trace also in these poems, especially in the earlier ones, his relationship to the older poets who influenced his work at its beginning — Byron, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, Coleridge—and also, all through, his debt to greater poets than these; to Shakespeare, Dante (and other Italians), to the great Greek and Roman poets, particularly Virgil.* All these matters have been written of many times and well.

With the publication of these volumes his power and originality became clear to a larger circle of readers. It was plain that a "new poet" had arrived. What especially aroused attention, amongst other things, was the combination of "high seriousness" and poetic imagination in poems such as "The Vision of Sin," "The Palace of Art," which touched problems or grave phases of human life and conduct—the direct appeal made, never as the mere moralist, always as the poet, to the conscience, heart, and spirit of the reader through the eye and the ear. "Heaven flows upon the soul in many dreams of high desire." And the poet's intention, which was lifelong, to raise people by his art "to higher things," never, in these volumes, weakened his pure poetry. Readers who know the poems of 1842 will have tasted the full flavour of Tennyson, for though, as well

* See the Book List, "Early Poems of A. Tennyson," edited by Churton Collins, for much information on this point.

as continuing his shorter lyrics, he did work afterwards on a larger scale and longer sustained, yet the essential poetic elements are much the same in "In Memoriam," the "Idylls," and elsewhere, as in these poems.

So much have they all been written of that further comment seems needless; but it may perhaps be noticed that rather less attention has been paid to "St. Simeon Stylites" and to "The Two Voices" than they deserve. Besides the special character of the poetry, the sheer intellectual force in the first, in the analysis of the mind of the saint (though Tennyson's study does not agree with the historical view of him) may be marked, while the second will repay the closest attention. The line of argument in "The Two Voices" does not touch us so nearly as it did the readers of its time, but even if the subject-matter be a little out of date it may yet be viewed as a truly poetical treatment of argumentative matter, which thing has rarely been well done. The dramatic element, too, in the dialogue of this poem is stronger than appears at the first reading, it is most skilfully introduced; and the metre is a triumph, it fits the character of the subject-matter closely, and raises it, when it might be prosaic, into poetry. The end is interesting as one example among many others of Tennyson's way of indicating the possible line of solution of a moral problem. (Compare, for example, "The Vision of Sin," "The Palace of Art," and that later "Two Voices," "The Ancient Sage.")

III.

"THE PRINCESS."

"The Princess" appeared in its first form in 1847; in the edition of 1850, the songs that come between the cantos were added. It is the happiest and most playful of Tennyson's longer poems, so much so that the serious thought underlying it is sometimes not fully recognized. It is a triumph of art that a poem which embodies the poet's deliberate view of one of the fundamental problems of human life—the function and education of woman—should appear at first sight but a romantic story in lovely form. The question of women's education in 1847 was a more burning and unusual one than it is now; we have become somewhat inured to the difficulties and the surprises of the problem, though we have not yet solved it.* The poem treats the subject on large human lines, though it does not survey, except perhaps in a glance or two, the whole range of woman's estate. But, as far as it goes, the poet's view is full of common sense; the conclusion rests on the firm foundation of great Nature herself, and man takes to himself the blame for the inadequate means provided for the development of woman's life :

Were we ourselves but half as good, as kind,
As truthful, much that Ida claims as right
Had ne'er been mooted, but as frankly theirs
As dues of Nature.

Let her make herself her own
To give or keep, to live and learn and be
All that not harms distinctive womanhood.
For woman is not undeveloped man
But diverse.

* See the "Memoir," Vol. I, Chap. XII, for Tennyson's interest in it.

A pleasant and suggestive scene from the actual life of Tennyson's time, forms a background to the undated romance of the tale itself. The first four cantos present the Princess Ida's adventure in women's education with a half earnest, half mischievous humour (humour which in Tennyson's poem is often "the laughter of love"); in the last three cantos the story passes into situations of natural and simple emotion, which inspire the style with a grave sweetness, and, in the final love scene, raise it into noble prophetic expression:

Yet in the long years liker must they grow,
The man be more of woman, she of man.

.
And so these twain, upon the skirts of Time,
Sit side by side, full summ'd in all their powers,
Dispensing harvest, sowing the To-Be,
Self-reverent each and reverencing each.

Tennyson has been charged with a note of condescension towards women in some places of his poetry; whether that be true or not, few readers will refuse to acknowledge that the essentials of the situation at the supreme moment, in this last scene, are right. But the true heroine of the poem, after all, is Psyche's baby, and Tennyson put in the songs between the cantos in order to make his meaning clearer.*

Apart from any "message" contained in the poem, the beauty, strength, and variety in it of Tennyson's art are astonishing: the range, discernment, and skill of the character drawing; the descriptions, rich and apt, of many different things; the songs interspersed, some of which seem to belong to the rose of dawn and the morning dew, and to have been borne to us out of the west, beneath those silver sails, to the music of the horns of elfland faintly

* See Dawson's study of "The Princess" (Book List).

blowing. The interest, charm, and poetry of "The Princess" are inexhaustible to the reader who cares for the poem at all.

IV.

"IN MEMORIAM."

It is right that "In Memoriam" should be, as it is, the poem most closely associated with Tennyson's name, for it arose out of that event in his life which touched his whole being more keenly and lastingly than any other vital thing that happened to him. The friendship of Alfred Tennyson with Arthur Hallam, which death seemed to sever when both were in early manhood, was one of those human attachments which King Alfred thought of when he said that "True friends are not brought forth by deceitful fortune but by the God who made them by Nature to be our kinsmen. Nature joineth and glueth friends together with most undividable love." And the friends,* in this case, were endowed with exceptional powers of intellect, heart, and imagination.

When Arthur Hallam died suddenly and unexpectedly at Vienna in 1833, that "shock of doom" was to the friend left behind a blow that seemed at first almost fatal. Tennyson's life for a time was stunned, and when his vitality began to reassert itself his heart was full of grief, and his mind beset with a swarm of doubts and questionings concerning some of the very foundations of human life. How he met this sea of trouble, how he fought the good fight, sometimes almost overwhelmed, engulfed, now growing stronger, then again weaker, and finally wresting strength and hope out of weakness and despair, is told in "In Memoriam."

* See "Memoir," Vol. I, Chap. xiv, for an account of Arthur Hallam; and the Temple Edition of "In Memoriam" for specimens of his poetry.

The writing of the poem was spread over nearly ten years, and its 131 sections represent the fluctuations and the stages of Tennyson's thought and feeling face to face with his loss. It is best to take his own account of the reasons for the nature of the poem. "In Memoriam" is not meant to be a strictly logical, closely conducted argument for the soul's immortality, but "short swallow flights of song" in which the singer, while relieving his grief by utterance, is thinking aloud, as it were, about the lost friendship, and the pain, hopes, and fears that arise within him as he longs for some certainty that his friend is not really dead nor forgetful of those left behind. There is, indeed, a large kind of logic in the argument throughout, and it is not difficult to trace the stages of the progress of the poet's mind as he passed from vacillation and despair to a firm hope resting on Eternal Love that includes law and love in one.

The poem is very personal to Tennyson, but all the way through the reader may perceive that it makes an appeal to any man or woman who has known love and its loss, and the desire that love shall continue after death. Some of the difficulties felt by Tennyson concerning the immortality of the soul had arisen especially out of the scientific knowledge of his day, and may not seem to us so vital to the question as they were to him; but, on the whole, the main argument of the poem still makes its appeal, and the solution offered by the poet (see Sections 124, 126, &c.) is the best—outside the greater definiteness of divine revelation embodied in the Christian creed—that we can reach.

Love is and was my Lord and King,
And in his presence I attend
To hear the tidings of my friend,
Which every hour his couriers bring.

Tennyson, then, does not give categorical answers to all objections or doubts, but he opens up vistas of beauty, hope, and love down which the eye of faith can pass, and view secret things. As was said before, his method is that of suggestion, based on the inmost feeling of the human heart, and it is a method full of humane common sense. It is one of his chief ways of answering such difficulties.

Apart from its main thought and structure, however, there are many things in "In Memoriam" to attract and hold the reader: the description of varied phases of human life and feeling; of nature in many moods; the effective and beautiful similes; the noble poetic workmanship seen in the exquisite fitness of the stanza-form to the subject-matter, and in the skilful melody of individual stanzas; the fine choice of phrase, word, and even letter, so that it seems as if art can go no further in the beauty it provides for eye, ear, and mind. Then, too, there are the expressions, and sometimes whole stanzas, that have become "household words," so that whenever they are met in books or talk they seem to bring a sense of English home feeling, almost as when one hears the mother-tongue in a foreign land. Much criticism has been expended upon "In Memoriam"; writers have not always agreed as to the character and value of the "argument" of the poem, but few have differed in their high estimation of the poetical art of the work.

No poem of Tennyson's reveals more clearly and continuously the inner spirit of the poet, nor has entered more deeply into the consciousness of England.*

In the year of the publication of "In Memoriam" (1850) Tennyson succeeded Wordsworth as Poet Laureate, and the

* See, for detailed study of this poem, Dr. A. C. Bradley's "In Memoriam."

work he did in that official capacity comprises some fine poetry, such as the Ode on the Duke of Wellington's death. Perhaps no Laureate ever filled his difficult office with greater dignity as an artist. No unworthy flattery of the nation or of its royal rulers came from his pen; where Tennyson praised, he praised for the right things.

V.

"MAUD" AND "THE IDYLLS OF THE KING."

In 1855 "Maud" was published. About no other poem of Tennyson, even among his friends, has opinion varied so much. He himself regarded it as one of the finest things he had done; he frequently read it aloud, and his reading of it was so remarkable that it seemed to involve interpretation of the poem. In the "Memoir" there will be found some illuminating notes on "Maud" by the poet himself. It is more dramatic in character than any other poem of Tennyson, and it stands alone in the variety and kind of its metre. Whatever view may be held of the lover's character and action, there can scarcely be two opinions as to the beauty of Tennyson's expression of pure and passionate love in the magic verses of the lyrics in this poem.

She is coming, my own, my sweet;
 Were it ever so airy a tread,
 My heart would hear her and beat,
 Were it earth in an earthy bed;
 My dust would hear her and beat,
 Had I lain for a century dead;
 Would start and tremble under her feet,
 And blossom in purple and red.

Of all Tennyson's poetry "The Idylls of the King" aim the highest. As he looked back in old age over the whole

course of his work, he saw the "Gleam" which led his genius, passing from theme to theme,

And then with a melody
Stronger and statelier,
Led me at length
To the city and palace
Of Arthur the King,

and it rested on the forehead of the king himself. "Arthur the blameless," "the king who loved me and cannot die"; there is a lingering affection in the words as he recalls that other Arthur, "the man I held as half-divine," who inspired "In Memoriam."

Tennyson had been strongly attracted by the story of Arthur from the time when, as a boy, he read the "Morte d'Arthur" of Malory. His first treatment of this theme began in 1832 with "The Lady of Shalott," and soon after he conceived the idea of casting the whole Arthurian legend into verse, but it was many years later before he determined upon the epic form of his poem. The first four Idylls appeared in 1859, and the last one in 1885; the subject altogether occupied his mind for nearly half a century.

As most people know, there are many versions of the Arthur story in English Literature. The subject has passed through the hands of writer after writer during the centuries, and the first English version (it had been in Latin and French before) dates back to 1205, when the patriotic Layamon of Worcestershire brought together and translated from the French the early stories of British history, among which occurs that of Arthur.* In the thirteenth and fourteenth

* Here is the character of Arthur as given by Layamon in his "Brut"—the first description of the British king in the English tongue: "He was liberal to all men alive. He was knight with the best, wondrously brave. He was to the young for father, and to the old for comfort, and with the unwise wonderfully stern. Wrong was to him very loathsome and the right ever dear."

centuries many romances took up the theme, none of them first-rate work, but about 1485 Sir Thomas Malory (of whom we know next to nothing) made his great compilation of Arthurian stories, the "Morte d'Arthur"—that wonderful ever-old, ever-new book which has continually inspired poets and artists, and will never cease to inspire them. After Malory came Spenser with his Prince Arthur of "The Faerie Queene"; Milton very nearly chose Arthur, instead of Adam and Eve, as the subject of his heroic poem; Matthew Arnold and Swinburne, after Tennyson, have created poems out of the undying Arthur legend.

For the matter of "The Idylls" Tennyson, with one exception (that of "Geraint and Enid" which is from the Welsh "Mabinogion") went to Malory's book. Readers may find interest and pleasure in comparing the beautiful prose of Malory with the fine poetry of Tennyson, and will learn a good deal about the poet's artistic method from the comparison.*

"The Idylls of the King" form, all together, the history of King Arthur and his Knights from the founding of the Round Table to the final scattering of the Order and the "passing" of the king. But Tennyson does not merely relate a history; he uses it to convey certain ideas concerning important moral questions of social life. Step by step his "Idylls" trace the gradual working of the taint of unfaithfulness in the court of Arthur (centred in the unlawful love of Launcelot and Guinevere), until the climax is reached in the general overthrow of all concerned. The poems convey vividly the sense of an inevitable doom coming slowly to overwhelm an un-

* For example, "Gareth and Lynette" and "The Passing of Arthur"—see the "Morte d'Arthur," Book VII and Book XXI.

healthy society. The "Morte d'Arthur" had no such direct aim; it is a picture of medieval life, partly true, partly fanciful, and draws no moral, though it may suggest one, or more than one.* The atmosphere of Tennyson's work is not that of Malory's.

Beyond this special idea involved in Tennyson's "Idylls," he has further introduced an element of allegory—"the world-wide war of Sense and Soul typified in individuals"—which, in the opinion of many, hinders, in places, the effectiveness of his story. To discuss this question here would take too much space, but the defence, such as it is, of Tennyson's allegorical matter may be found in the "Memoir," and it is well to read the poems in the light of his own aims and intention as stated there.

There is no doubt, however, as Jowett said, that Tennyson has made the story of Arthur and his Knights "a great revelation of human experience and of the thoughts of many hearts." Into this work Tennyson poured his spiritual, moral, and poetic energy.

The twelve poems which make up the "Idylls of the King" were not written in the order in which they come in the series,† and, as we have seen, were spread over many years. Each poem was, in one sense, conceived separately,

* It is questionable whether Tennyson was justified in using the original material as he did. Many lovers of the old Arthurian romances feel that, in places, he did not treat the original stories fairly; in bending them to the service of a point of view that is not found there, he has lowered, for example, the characters of two great knights, Gawain and Tristram.

† The order of their first appearance was as follows:—"Guinevere," "Enid," "Vivien," "Elaine" (1859), "The Coming of Arthur," "Holy Grail," "Pelleas and Ettarre," "Passing of Arthur" (1869), "Last Tournament" (1871), "Gareth and Lynette" (1872), "Balin and Balan" (1885).

and then fitted at last into its place in the narrative. That fact is sufficient to explain why we feel a certain want of unity in the series when viewed as a whole. The Idylls fall apart easily, and we come to regard each one as a separate work of art; which could not be done were they an organic whole. They do not form one great epic; they are rather a series of pictures representing those scenes in the story of Arthur which the poet chose out from the old romance as most suitable for his purpose of "art for man's sake"—the expression of certain simple and great ideas (needful, in his belief, to the health of human society) in as effective and beautiful a form as possible. The poems are linked together, of course, by the narrative background of the Arthurian story, and by the ideas they express, but they do not grow naturally one out of the other.*

They all share, in varying degree, in the great qualities of Tennyson's mind and art—the sane yet exalted view of essential human life; the vivid portraiture; the accurate and beautiful descriptions of Nature and other things; the effective phrase which expresses some fact, thought, or emotion in such a way that it seems fresh and new; and everywhere the workmanship of the great poet. Each "Idyll," however, has its own character and atmosphere, and every reader has his favourite among these poems. Some of them are undoubtedly more successful than others, as may be easily seen, for example, if one places "Balin and Balan" (written last, in 1885) beside any of the earlier poems, or "The Last Tournament," fine as it is, beside "The Holy Grail."

* For discussion of the growth and relationship of "The Idylls," see MacCallum's "Tennyson's Idylls and Arthurian Story" (Book List).

As simple stories, charming, romantic, and human, "Gareth and Lynette," "Geraint and Enid," and "Launcelot and Elaine" stand out from the rest; the narrative of these is mostly uncomplicated and follows the original old romances fairly close. Then there is the tragic interest of "The Last Tournament"; the appealing and pathetic beauty of "Guinevere" (marred a little, for some, by the too-condescending attitude of Arthur in the farewell scene, due to Tennyson's allegorical intent); and the splendour of "The Coming" and "The Passing of Arthur"—but all of them have been described again and again.

As to supremacy among "The Idylls," there is much to be said for "The Holy Grail." We know that the poet gave to it his deep thought, his finest emotion, his most spiritual imagination; he hesitated greatly before treating the subject at all, but at the last it came to him, we are told, "as if by a breath of inspiration." It occupies a central position in the chain of "Idylls"; it marks the beginning of the outward breaking up of the Order of the Round Table, as the spreading unfaithfulness in the court had inwardly, long before, marked its doom. The quest of the vision of the mystic vessel took away so many of the knights that only a "lean Order" was left, and of those who went, "scarce a tithe" returned. What is meant, exactly, by "The Holy Grail" in Tennyson's "Idyll" is a question which naturally arises. In Malory it is a real object, a vessel containing the Sacred Blood, closely connected with the belief in the Divine Presence in the chief sacrament of the Christian religion—the Chalice of the Mystery of Faith. The nineteenth century poet makes it only half-objective, and using symbolism and allegory fittingly and beautifully at this point in his story, seems purposely to leave undetermined the meaning and char-

acter of the mystic thing. He treats it as a touchstone for the life and character of the individual knights. In its widest significance in Tennyson's poem, may it not perhaps stand for a gleam of the Ineffable, a momentary glimpse on this earth of the Beatific Vision, that which strikes on every man's soul at some time in his life, whether he seek it or not—the Love whose very glance is inevitably a judgment? And the wisest word concerning it is that of Sir Bors :

Ask me not, for I may not speak of it,
I saw it.

The poet implies by his description of the action of the knights and by the attitude and words of Arthur as to the Quest, that for the few, such as Galahad and Percival, it may be a duty, with stern discipline of body and soul, and the surrender of every earthly tie, to give themselves utterly to the pursuit of the Holy Thing; but, for the many, their duty lies in righting human wrongs in common life. To these last in reward, the Vision may come, in flashes, unexpectedly, in the moments of quiet, after faithful action; such, in a supreme manner, was the king's own experience—

Until this earth he walks on seems not earth.

As an artist Tennyson rises in this Idyll to supreme heights, and has filled his poem with surpassingly beautiful, strong and varied matter—human and divine—and, amongst other things, the close realization of many moods, not so much of the emotional as of the spiritual life. And all the various elements are perfectly fused in the exalted air of the spirit in which the poet is working. The mystic atmosphere is the special mark of this poem, and is sustained throughout,

finding a last noble expression in the closing words of Arthur :—

[work] being done,
 Let visions of the night or of the day
 Come, as they will ; and many a time they come
 Until this earth he walks on seems not earth,
 This light that strikes his eyeball is not light,
 This air that smites his forehead is not air
 But vision—yea, his very hand and foot—
 In moments when he feels he cannot die,
 And knows himself no vision to himself,
 Nor the high God a vision, nor that One
 Who rose again.

Every book on Tennyson has its chapter on "The Idylls" ; and readers may find plenty of criticism, friendly and unfriendly. As we have already noticed, the poet has laid himself open to adverse criticism in some directions. It is clear that in the "Idylls" the modern demand for a certain kind of realism is not met ; it may also be true that the moral significance of parts of the story has been too much emphasised ; further, we may be inclined to agree with Ruskin that "we feel the art and finish in these poems a little more than we like to feel it," yet the fact remains that to many a simple reader who takes poetry only for the sake of enjoyment and recreation these Tennysonian stories of King Arthur and his circle do appeal with a special force. One such reader of intelligence, coming upon them lately for the first time, far from finding them without realism, exclaimed : "How true it all is to life !" And another, in the midst of enjoying the beauty of description and language, paused to say : "It makes one want to be good."

These testimonies, though from "uncritical admirers," are not without their critical value, and would have pleased Tennyson because they came from persons who were in con-

tinual contact with reality, whose lives were daily filled with hard manual work.

In the long intervals between the writing of the various "Idylls" or groups of "Idylls," Tennyson produced numerous other poems. Amongst these "Enoch Arden," translated into many languages, has been one of the most popular. It is a noble specimen of narrative poetry, and Tennyson is perhaps seen there at his best as a story-teller. It has been attacked by the realists, but those who have ever felt its truth and charm will not be inclined, even while allowing those critics some reason, to pay too much heed to their argument. Indeed, there is plenty of realism of a kind in the poem, in the descriptions of village life by the sea and of the country people with their simple feelings; but here, as in other poems of simple life, Tennyson has selected the ideal and permanent elements of the situation rather than the more sordid and accidental details with which modern realists consider it their duty to present us. Moreover, to touch another objection made against this and similar poems, the cultivated art of Tennyson in "Enoch Arden" is of another kind than the greater and simpler art of Wordsworth in "Michael," but should we not be able, while distinguishing, to take the sort of beauty that each poet has to offer, and be thankful? We English people are rather encouraged to be over-critical by the very wealth of our poetry; we have so many varieties of lovely and strong work at our doors that we are prodigal in accepting and rejecting.

Among the simpler poems of Tennyson there is one, "The May Queen," which has been the butt of certain critics, somewhat in the same way, though with less reason, perhaps, as Wordsworth's "Idiot Boy" has been. It may be that the metre of the poem is partly responsible for this

attitude; the tune of it does not seem altogether fitted to express the simple and pathetic movements of the child's mind. To obtain the right effect the lines should be read slowly, with care for a dignified interpretation of the emotional expression. No one, of course, claims for this poem a place with Tennyson's greatest work, but, in spite of any defect, it holds simple human truth, and sincere pathetic beauty.

Another poem, that of "Rizpah" (contained in the volume of *Ballads and Poems* of 1880) has earned from the critics, even from the realists among them, unlimited praise. To read it, in its bare simplicity of terrible statement and its utter realization of the tortured mother's heart, is to know, even if we had no other testimony, that the gracious and profuse loveliness of much of Tennyson's poetry had its roots in no weakness, but in sheer strength of intellect and feeling.

VI.

LAST POEMS.

Leaving untouched, for want of space, many other interesting and beautiful poems (such as the historical ballads, the dialect poems, some sonnets, as that to Victor Hugo, and some translations), we pass to the last volumes issued by the poet*—"Tiresias" (1885), "Demeter" (1889), and "The Death of Oenone" (1892)—where we find Tennyson working on the same great lines of art and thought as

* Tennyson's six dramas (written between 1875 and 1892) have not been treated in this pamphlet, partly for want of space, and partly because they stand so much apart from his other work. It is now generally acknowledged that they are not great as drama, though there are some fine dramatic situations in them, much interesting matter, and a great deal of good poetry. Readers will find the plays treated in Sir A. Lyall's "Tennyson" (see Book List).

before, but with a difference. Most of the work is done with the old poetic skill, sympathy, and beauty, but there is an added tenderness, and, in treatment, as had been pre-figured in the 1880 volume, greater depth and restraint in expression. It has been well said that there is "a full and grave maturity" in these later volumes, though it should be remembered that various earlier poems, such as "Ulysses," had shown this power before. And where he touches the "problem of the universe," the meaning of life, face to face with all the anomalies and contradictions of human nature, and of the apparent cruelty and indifference of physical nature, the atmosphere has somewhat changed. Many years have passed since, in "In Memoriam" and in "Locksley Hall," he had touched these matters; he sees now, in many tracts of social life, increasing materialism, increasing unrest, together with increasing philanthropic efforts to help humanity. He realizes that science and human endeavour have not accomplished as much as he had hoped for in those earlier days. He still views life as the great mystery, despite every faith or creed, with the strange and cruel ironies of good side by side with evil, of justice beside injustice. These bitter contrasts had always struck him, but they strike him now more than ever, and he has learned that evil is stronger than he had once believed. Yet, according to his way, he faces the facts, views the opposing forces, allows the enormous strength of an evil will in man, and then says, in poem after poem:

"I don't understand, I can't explain, but here are the facts: men are cruel, treacherous, faithless, sensual; the evil flourish, the good are crushed; the universe seems indifferent, callous, to our sin and suffering; yet the human heart persists in feeling nobly, the voice of conscience still

speaks, unselfish love does exist, God is moving somewhere in supreme justice; at the end we shall know. He is the Pilot of the Ship of the World."

Tennyson does not offer any easier or clearer solution of the problem of life; there is no light-hearted optimism in this class of later poem; the very style of the expression of his faith has changed from the sure serenity of the

one divine far-off event
To which the whole creation moves,

to the labouring hope of

Act first, this Earth, a stage so gloom'd with woe
You all but sicken at the shifting scenes.
And yet be patient. Our playwright may show
In some fifth act what this wild drama means.

He is too much in earnest to hide his grave perplexity as he looks out over the human world, in its welter of agony and darkness; but the bare scientific sincerity with which he gives his report inclines us to trust the truth of his final message, which is an act of faith in Eternal Justice and Love.

The aged poet, it would seem, lets us into his most intimate thought and feeling in some of these last poems. He still, as ever, questions the Universe of its meaning, as regards both the whole race of man, and himself, the individual, but then he utters his last prophetic conclusions on the whole matter. As to the human race,

Prophet eyes may catch a glory slowly gaining on the shade.

As to the individual, nearing the end of mortal life,

Spirit, . . .
Fear not thou the hidden purpose of that Power which alone is
great.

As to the youthful and the vigorous,

O young mariner . . .
 . . .
 You that are watching
 . . .
 With eyes of wonder,
 . . .
 Down to the haven,
 . . .
 Launch your vessel,
 And crowd your canvas.
 After it, follow it,
 Follow the gleam.

And as to those who mourn,

The face of Death is towards the Sun of Life :
 His shadow darkens earth : his truer name
 Is Onward, no discordance in the roll
 And march of that Eternal Harmony
 Whereto the worlds beat time, though faintly heard,
 Until the great Hereafter.

Therefore, let all the world, young and old,

Kneel adoring Him the Timeless in the flame that mea-
 sures Time.

And the restless questioning of the poet has almost ended
 when the "calm of sunset and evening star" descends on him
 as he conceives himself putting out to sea with no "moaning
 of the bar,"

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
 Too full for sound and foam,
 When that which drew from out the boundless deep*
 Turns again home.

* Compare with this, "De Profundis," and "God and the Universe"; the mystery of birth and death; and see for a study of "De Profundis" an essay by Wilfrid Ward in "Tennyson and his Friends" (Appendix).

VII.

Tennyson has been charged by critics of the "reaction" with shallowness of thought, and he has been compared unfavourably with Browning on this account. He himself believed (as Wordsworth in his day had believed) that he had a message to deliver to his time, and he treated in his verse some of its chief religious and ethical difficulties. It may well be that some of his ideas that immediately touched and helped his own age have served their purpose, and will not prove of value for all time; but other tracts of his thought dealing with the universal fears, hopes, and desires of men and women cannot fail, it would seem, to form one of the foundation stones of his immortality as poet. Further, he has been proved a friend for adversity. His words, in poem after poem, come home to those who are, at times, sad and perplexed at the course of the great world march. He is gentle and pitiful as he suggests consolation to the troubled; for such he has a "healing power" all his own. We may not always feel it possible or seemly, with Browning, to "greet the unseen with a cheer"; rather may it suit us, when burdens are heavy, to hear the Ancient Sage :

My son, the world is dark with griefs and graves,
So dark that men cry out against the Heavens.
Who knows but that the darkness is in Man?
The doors of Night may be the gates of Light.

Browning is for other times and other hearts.

The character of a great poet's power and influence is a fascinating subject on which there is no room here to touch, but we may just notice that it has been treated in more than one poem of Tennyson :

He saw through life and death, through good and ill,
 He saw through his own soul ;
 The marvel of the everlasting will,
 An open scroll,
 Before him lay. . .

The poet's "fruitful wit" is

. . . bravely furnished all abroad to fling
 The winged shafts of truth,
 To throng with stately blooms the breathing spring
 Of Hope and Youth.

And again,

He sat him down in a lonely place
 And chanted a melody loud and sweet,
 That made the wild-swan pause in her cloud,
 And the lark drop down at his feet.

The artists of Nature recognized a master-craftsman.

In his stimulating and suggestive paper, the "Reaction against Tennyson," Dr. A. C. Bradley has singled out for notice, amongst many other things, two of the remarkable "minor merits" of our poet: one regarding Nature, and the other regarding the sciences of Nature. He considers that, "If a man who has derived great happiness from the observation of Nature were stricken with blindness, or confined for the rest of his life to a sick room, and if he were condemned to lose his recollection of all poets but one, Tennyson's is the poetry he should choose to keep," because the poet's perceptions of the sense impressions he receives from Nature are so accurate and so delicate, and his power of translating these into language so adequate and so right, that in recalling his description of almost any aspect of Nature we seem to see the very thing itself. Perhaps this is more than a "minor merit"; is it not the foundation for all other kinds of appreciation of Nature? Does not such Nature-description as Tennyson's carry with it, or suggest in itself, much more than the mere picture, true and beautiful as that may be?

And does it not, in its own way, supply something as much needed as Wordsworth's profounder treatment of Nature?

The other "minor merit" is certainly unique among the work of poets. Tennyson's attitude towards science is another proof of how much he felt the spirit of his time and how closely he embodied what he felt in his poetry. All his life he was a student of "the sciences of Nature"—astronomy, geology, animal and plant life of all kinds—he keenly loved these things, and he wove them into his poetry in a simple, unpedantic way*, using them in direct description, in similes, and in illustration of many sorts; while in his grave poems, concerning man and his destiny and the problems presented by these, he based some of his noblest lines upon the facts of the natural world as stated by science.

Science, sometimes regarded as the enemy, or at least the hinderer of the artist, in the case of Tennyson was a benign influence. It is perhaps due, in some measure, to the training that the study of science had given to his mind and imagination that we owe the exquisite accuracy of his nature description, and something of that melodious beauty of versification which springs from careful precision in the use of every word and letter. It is almost certain that his scientific study encouraged in him the unflinching and truthful attitude with which he faced "the problems of the universe" and refused to take refuge in an easy optimism. Such optimism regarding man and the Universe as he displays is that of one who, having considered all the facts, adverse and otherwise, can say: "On these stepping stones I rise to higher things."

He was indeed the poet of his own age: how much he

* In "The Princess" the pedantry of scientific knowledge is delightfully satirized.

is "for all time" has yet to be determined. But looking back over his long record of strong, beautiful, untiring, and varied work—the many "imaginings calm and fair," the "truth and pure delight," the enduring and high loves he has so royally bestowed upon us—it is impossible to believe that those weaknesses or limitations in it which some latter day criticism has dwelt upon will much matter* when Time has "orbed" it all into "the perfect star." Then, having "assumed his winged throne," secure in the firmament of poetry, with no uncertain light will our poet

Beacon from the abode where the Eternal are.

* See some fine and suggestive remarks on this subject in Prof. George Saintsbury's "Corrected Impressions" (Lectures III and IV). Scattered throughout Saintsbury's books on English Literature will be found criticisms of Tennyson's poetry marked by the wide and fervent scholarship, sanity, and breadth of view we are accustomed to in that writer's work (*e.g.* "History of English Prosody," Vol. III, Book 10).

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